

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Office of Current Intelligence
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CURRENT INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: The Soviet Presence in Yemen

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The USSR has played a significant role in Yemeni developments through its assistance to the UAR's intervention in the civil war as well as through its direct economic, political, and military support for the revolutionary regime.

2. There are now approximately 700 Soviet specialists and technicians in Yemen, the majority of whom probably are economic and construction personnel. (For comparison, there are 2,155 in Egypt and 1,250 in Iraq.)

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Other projects requiring Soviet technicians and laborers include a housing development and kerosene tin factory at Hudaydah, an "international" airport, and a cement plant at Sana.

3. In the field of military assistance, Soviet experts have been working on the repair and modernization of Yemeni airfields since the revolution.

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4. Prior to last December, Soviet military aid to the Yemeni revolutionary regime was provided indirectly through the UAR.

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6. We believe this upsurge in Soviet activity in Yemen stems from Moscow's usual attempts to take advantage of new opportunities for extending its influence in the Arab world, not from a radical change in Soviet policy objectives in Yemen. Soviet assistance to the revolutionary regime is part of the USSR's general policy of supporting Arab nationalist regimes with the long-range aim of reducing Western influence and encouraging regional instability which, the Soviets hope, will provide increasingly attractive targets for exploitation. Moscow's program to establish a foothold in Yemen, which would place the USSR in a good position to exploit the downfall of the monarchy, dates back to a Soviet aid agreement with the Imam in 1956.

7. There are, however, two main factors that will tend to place limits on the extent of the Soviet presence in Yemen and the range of Soviet ambitions in this area. First, Yemen's primitive political and economic structure does not make it a particularly attractive target for large-scale Soviet investments. It is unlikely that the Soviet leaders would wish to get deeply involved in a country which has practically no public administration, commercial institutions,

or natural resources. But an even more important inhibiting factor is Moscow's desire to avoid antagonizing Nasir. In view of the heavy Egyptian commitment in protecting and securing the revolutionary regime against the royalists backed by Saudi Arabia and Jordan and in view of Nasir's desire to develop Yemen as a pliant ally which will follow his lead in foreign policy and Arab politics, any Soviet attempt to establish a dominant influence in Yemen's affairs would inevitably incur Nasir's hostility.

8. The USSR has invested too much in its long-standing policy of supporting Nasir to risk jeopardizing this relationship for some transitory gain in a backward country such as Yemen. Soviet and Egyptian objectives in the Middle East are by no means identical and Nasir's great prestige and influence in the Arab world will continue to oblige the USSR to accommodate its policies to the priority requirement of maintaining reasonably effective and normal relations with Cairo.

9. For these reasons we do not believe the Soviet leaders have in mind any specific military objectives, such as establishing Soviet bases in Yemen or developing a capability for obstructing Western shipping lanes through the Red Sea in the event of a general war. The Yemeni Government, as an Egyptian satellite, is in any case, no more likely to agree to the establishment of Soviet bases than is Nasir himself.

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